STRANGE TALES

FROM HUMBLE LIFE,

BY JOHN ASHWORTH.

ANSWERED AT LAST.

PUBLISHED BY PERMISSION OF THE AUTHOR.

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Gift
W. F. Worner
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"Answered at Last."

I have often thought that John's heavenly vision of golden vials filled with incense, the prayers of the saints, would contain many hundred thousands of prayers of parents for their children, especially of godly parents for ungodly children; for, among the millions of earnest petitions that daily ascend to the throne, many of them come from hearts made sad by those they love the dearest grieving them the most. And how many of such parents have prayed and waited, prayed and waited, and have at last gone down to the grave without seeing their heart-breaking request answered—have died before their dearest hope was realized.

How is it that some truly consistent and earnest religious parents have wicked children? We know it is so, but we also know it is the exception, and not the rule. A large majority of ministers, officers, and members of our Christian churches, are children of pious parents; and the rule is, that pious parents have pious children, and where we find the exception we are surprised and pained, and wonder how it is. The sons of the good old patriarch, Jacob, almost broke his heart. David was a good man,

and one whose recorded experience has been a blessing to millions, yet he had great trouble with his children. Good old Eli loved and served his God, yet he had two bad sons. And many good parents since their day have had to mourn, and weep, and pray over their undutiful offspring, through many long years, and themselves go to heaven before their prayers have been answered. But their requests are treasured up in golden vessels before the throne, and who knows how many of them will be heard? Many of them have already been answered, and, for the comfort of sorrowing fathers and mothers, the following incidents are recorded:

Fifteen years since, a person kept a small shop in Rochdale. She had an only brother, named John, residing north of the town, who sometimes came over to see his sister. He was remarkably good-looking—tall, strong, apparently healthy, and about forty years of age. Being well acquainted with the sister, she requested me to spend a day with her brother, and take him out to see the country round Rochdale, especially mentioning Hollingworth. The day was fine, and while walking leisurely toward Hollingworth Lake, we began talking a little about our own histories, from which I found that John was a farmer, and an active member of a Chris-

tian church, and that he took more delight in conversing about religion than either his crops or his cattle. He was a good speaker, seemed truly happy while telling of his conversion to God, and his Christian experience was rich and solid.

"You have much to be thankful for—a good farm, good health, and a good hope of heaven," I observed.

"Yes; I have much for which I ought to be grateful, but I have one standing trouble that will go with me to the grave; for though I know I am a pardoned sinner, memory is there, and the remembrance of some of my sins leaves a sting that will never be extracted. Money cannot do it, time will not do it, and all the people in the world cannot if they would. I refer to my conduct to my father and mother."

For several minutes we walked on in silence, for John seemed deeply affected, and I did not know what to say. I at last asked—"Are they both dead?"

"Yes—many years since; and I believe that my wickedness shortened their days."

"Were they religious?"

"Yes. I now think that two better creatures never lived; but from the time I became a young man, they had nothing from me but sorrow upon sorrow. They died when I was at the worst. I

believe they offered up thousands of prayers for my salvation. Many of them I heard, for we had daily prayer; but long before they died I refused to join them—I either contrived to be absent, or walked out of the house—but now I set a value on these old prayers beyond language to express. They piled them up in heaven for me."

"In what did your bad conduct principally consist?"

"Refusing to attend church, abusive language, neglecting work, bad company, late hours, and worse. But I did not think of the pain I was inflicting at the time; in fact, I did not care. A kind old creature, who lived with my parents for many years, and who now resides in a cottage near my farm, has told me, at times, of what she saw, and she always weeps while telling. She has several times given me the history of one night, part of which I knew.

"On going out, that day she refers to, my father told me, with a troubled look, that my conduct was getting past bearing, and that if I was not at home by eleven o'clock, he would bolt the door. Mother heard what he said, and looked very uneasy, for she knew he would perform his threat. My poor mother had often waited up for me much later, though eleven is a late hour for farmers. The old servant, when first telling me, said—

"'I saw your mother go up-stairs several times that day, and I knew what for. She knew where to take her troubles, and you, Johnny, found her plenty of them. When night came, and it began to be late, she became very uneasy, and many times opened the door, and looked out into the dark, hearkening for your step with breathless anxiety. Your father sat reading his Bible by the fireside, but, poor man, he did not read much; he looked more into the fire than into the book, for he was greatly troubled. He looked often at the clock, and I thought he was afraid of the time coming. I, too, was very anxious, for I knew what was going on, and I would have given my new cap to have heard your feet coming.

"'The clock struck at last; your father quietly rose and bolted the door. Your mother bent down her head to hide her silent tears. I believe the shooting of that bolt went to her heart. O Johnny! it is a sad thing to bolt a door on a child—to lock one out that ought to be in. Not a word was spoken. We all retired to bed, but not to sleep. I think your mother was long on her knees that night, and I have heard her say since, that neither she nor your father slept one wink. It was a sorrowful night for us all.'

"I remember going home the night the servant mentioned, and, finding all fast, got the barn

ladder, and crept through the hay-loft door upon the haystack, thinking how cleverly I had found myself a bed. My father said little to me for several days, but my mother entreated me, for her sake, to give up my bad company, saying, 'I should bring down their gray hairs with sorrow to the grave.' And I believe she was right in her predictions. They both lie buried in the village church-yard, not far from my dwelling, near a little gate on the west side. I have many times leaned over that gate, and looked on their grave, with my heart almost breaking. Every bar of that gate has been wet with my tears, and one dark night I knelt on the cold stone that covers them, praying they would forgive me."

"And how did you become a changed man?"

"I well remember when I was at the worst, I had continued convictions and strivings of the Spirit. There was nothing troubled me so much as the prayers of my parents. Wherever I was at the time of prayer, I was miserable, and I many times wished they would not pray for me, but it is a mercy they did. For several Sundays after my father's death (he died the last), I, for decency's sake, attended the church, and on one Sabbath morning I had such a view of my misconduct, that I wondered the earth did not open and swallow me up. For many weeks after, I

was in the most wretched state of mind. I wanted to pray, but durst not; and when I read the Bible—my father's Bible—which I sometimes did in private, I felt worse and worse, until I was forced to go on my knees and cry for mercy. I found mercy, and believe the prayers of my parents have at last been heard. Oh! how I wish they had lived to see the change. I believe they would have lived longer. It is a dreadful thing for children to disobey parents, especially good parents. It is sure to bring sorrow, sooner or later. But, thank God, their prayers are heard. They will be surprised to see me in heaven, but I do believe I shall see them there, and it will be a meeting."

"Yes, John," thought I, "you are right; it will be a meeting; and I believe there will be myriads of such meetings in heaven. The prayers of God's saints, whatever they are for, are treasured up in golden vials to show how precious they are."

John's description of his wicked conduct to his parents, and the sorrow he had caused them, reminded me of an early acquaintance, who brought much sorrow to his home. How many families who, but for one, would be happy families, have a continual cloud hanging over their home in consequence of that one! There needs but one wicked, disobedient child to destroy the peace of a whole

house. To fear going among our friends, to keep away from the social circle, lest we may be asked something respecting an erring sister or brother, or an undutiful child, is very depressing to the spirits. To seek secresy and retirement, and even keep from the house of God, because the one has brought some new disgrace, has been done thousands of times. Many a good man, who fondly hoped to see his son or sons become his stay and staff, and inherit his name and credit, has been bowed down to the earth to find them his disgrace. When a good man, so circumstanced, sees another good man surrounded with kind, affectionate, dutiful sons and daughters, how his soul yearns with anguish over the contrast! He only can give a true estimate between a good child and a bad one.

Thomas, the young man now before us, caused his father the greatest trouble, and that good, kind old man had to go down to the grave, and never see the child, for whom he had offered thousands of prayers, become a changed character. He made the latter part of his father's days, days of continual sorrow; so much so that he once said to a friend with whom he was conversing about his son, that "he felt afraid he should lose his natural affection for him, and become absolutely indifferent to his welfare, either here

or hereafter;" but he finished this painful sentence with a flood of tears, showing that his love for him was still very powerful.

Many times, when Thomas was out late, the mother would pretend to be busy sewing, that she might have an excuse for remaining up, so that the door might not be bolted against her wicked son; and frequently, after her husband had retired to bed—not to rest—did the poor, afflicted creature kneel down and pour out her soul to God on behalf of her erring child; and Thomas, more than once, when peeping through the keyhole, saw his mother on her knees, and knew for whom she was praying, and though he was often more or less drunk, yet he could afterwards tell how painfully the sight affected him.

The mornings following these late hours, bad company, and drink, were sorrowful mornings. Few words were said by any of the family at breakfast. The little that was eaten was eaten in sadness; but the cause of all this would seldom be there, for he was like almost all such, too big a coward to face the consequences of his own wicked doings, and so contrived to get out of the house, or remained in bed. He was in bed one Sunday morning when all the rest of the family were gone to their place of worship. The subject that morning was David's sorrow for his son

Absalom. The preacher wept much while speaking of the broken hearts of godly parents—broken by the conduct of ungodly children. Poor man! he spoke from experience, and he was speaking to some who could weep with him.

That was the last time the father of Thomas attended a place of worship. He gradually sank in health, lingering for many months. Step by step he went to the grave, without any particular disease. The last day of his life he wished to have a private interview with his son; he felt anxious to give him his blessing and a last warning while he was able to speak. Thomas was led into the room of his dying father by his weeping mother, with tears rolling down her cheeks. He sat down beside the bed; the father stretched out his thin, clammy hand, and Thomas took hold of it, waiting his father's words, but none were spoken. Speech had fled—he never spoke again.

Every day that Thomas went to his work he had to pass within a few yards of his father's grave. I have seen him several times in the dark, looking through the rails on the spot where his parent lay buried, and once ventured to ask him how he felt as he was looking on the last resting-place of his good, Christian father.

"Oh! he was a decent old chap," was his reply, and went whistling away.

Shortly after the night I last saw him, he left the country, and little was heard of him for some time. One morning a letter came, addressed to his mother. It was the handwriting of her son—the undutiful son of a thousand prayers. On the last page of the letter were the following words:

"Mother, do you ever feel your heart hard when you pray? I have been on my knees many times, asking God to forgive me for my conduct to you and my poor dead father; but oh! how hard my heart feels! I want to pray, but, somehow, cannot. Yet I cannot give it up. Most of this letter has been written on my knees. The Lord have mercy upon me, and soften my heart, and bend my stiff neck. O Lord! keep me and save me."

When the mother received this letter, she, like Hezekiah, went in private and spread it before the Lord. Oh! how she prayed, again and again, that her ungodly, wandering child might now become a new creature in Christ Jesus. She rejoiced over the letter, but she rejoiced with trembling. Hope was now brightening, but doubt still lingered, and she was afraid to say a word about it even to her most intimate friends. But letter after letter followed, all in the same strain, and then came one that money could not buy, telling the dear, dear mother that Thomas was now a pardoned child of God. The piled-up prayers of the father in

heaven, and the mother on earth, were answered at last.

Five years have now rolled away since Thomas wrote this letter to his mother, but still he remains a sincere and active Christian. He holds high office in the church, and is much beloved and respected, and is an unspeakable comfort to his widowed mother; but Thomas has often been heard to say that he never thinks of his father without a bitter pang of sorrow.

"But are we always to wait until death before our prayers are answered?" some may ask. No, not always, though many have done so.

Good old Mr. Grimshaw, one of the most popular and useful preachers in his day, had a most wicked son. He prayed for him long, but died without an answer. This son, on one occasion, entering the church where his father had often preached, was greatly overcome with sorrow and grief because of his sins, and, while at a prayer-meeting held after the service, in bitterness of soul, he besought the Lord, for Christ's sake, to have mercy upon him, and pardon his transgressions. His prayer was heard, and, in the fulness of his joy, he leaped to his feet, and lifting up both hands toward heaven, called out with a loud voice—"Oh! what will my father say?—what will my father say?" Yes, and what will many

a father and mother yet say when they shall see their returned prodigals in glory? But we do not always wait so long. There are thousands whose hopes have been so long deferred that hope was almost gone, who have yet lived to see their hopes realized. Praying breath is not spent in vain, and we give the following as an illustration:

Near the town of Bury, a place about five miles from Rochdale, there formerly resided a good old Christian, of the name of Crompton. This man had been long a laborer in the Lord's vineyard, and had been the instrument of much good to others. How inscrutable is this truth to many, and yet it is a truth. Ministers, Sunday-school teachers, and others, who are anxiously working and praying for the conversion of souls, can see others saved, and those for whom they are the most concerned hardening their hearts against all efforts made on their behalf. They see many of the most unlikely brought to Christ, and those they have the most reason for believing should be converted, become the most hopeless and hardened. Nothing but faith in God and a consciousness of duty could keep such men to their work; reasoning never could. This is one of God's lessons to teach us that the souls of other children—the souls of strangers—are as precious as the souls of those we feel we could die for; and if

we have to preach and pray with sadder hearts, it makes us more in earnest, and what to us is a great grief may prove to others an unspeakable blessing. Our very sorrows may, in this respect, be turned to the glory of God.

Crompton was in this mysterious position. He had one son, named Samuel, who was to him a source of continual anxiety. He had trained him, in example and precept, with much care; and while he was young, while he could "give him a kiss and put him to bed," he was full of bright thoughts for his future; but as he rose up to manhood, and his disposition began to unfold itself, he turned out to be a very ungrateful and rebellious son. He left his home, wandered for several years from place to place, and grew every day more wicked. All news from Samuel was bad news; all reports respecting his conduct only deepened the wound in his father's heart. He wished him at home, yet feared his coming. He seldom mentioned his name, yet there was no name so often thought of, and especially when the old man was at prayer, then he was never forgotten.

Oh! what millions of prayers have followed the steps of wandering prodigals! I have often thought that one reason why so many emigrant ships safely ride the storms of the trackless deep,

is because so many prayers follow them. Crompton's prayers had followed Samuel, and, after many years, he, in shattered health, in the words of the prodigal, said, "I will arise and go to my father." His father received the returning son with mixed feelings of pain and pleasure—pain to see him so very miserable and wretched in appearance, and pleasure to see that he was yet out of hell. The change in Samuel's external appearance was not greater than the internal. His haughty soul was bowed to the dust, and he was come home to implore forgiveness, and to tell of the wonderful power of saving grace to the chief of sinners. Oh! what joyful news for the poor old father! His long-sorrowful countenance beamed with cheerfulness. He had many times prayed, "Lord, whatever may become of my Samuel's body, do save his soul," and now he saw him again, weak in body, but happy in a consciousness of sins forgiven. Disobedience to parents had shortened his life, as it has done to thousands. The sin of the soul was pardoned, but the consequence to the body was a long, wasting sickness.

During the latter part of Samuel's sickness, his father watched over him with the greatest tenderness. They could now kneel together at the mercy-seat, and talk of the wonderful way in which the Lord brought him to see himself a sinner, and

how much better it was for him to go down to an early grave and go to heaven, than live on in rebellion and die an old man, unsaved. It was painful to the aged man to see his son wasting away before his eyes, but it was far less painful than to see him living a life of wickedness—his soul was saved, and that was to his father the principal thing.

Mrs. Horrocks (now residing in Heywood), who was present at the moment of parting, describes it as a sight to be long remembered. Speaking of Samuel's death, she said: "The last day came—the day of parting—the day of death. Samuel's summons to the eternal world arrived, but the messenger brought no terrors. With his last breath he praised his God, and blessed his father; and when, with that last breath, his spirit glided away to the realms of the blest, the old man fell on his knees, and, stretching out his hands over his dead child, his long, white locks hanging over his shoulders, and tears streaming down his cheeks, thanked God, in choking sobs, that his Samuel was now in glory. 'Yes, Lord,' said the old man, 'I have long prayed, and prayed, and hoped against hope, but now Thou, in Thine own way, hast heard me. My child is safe—my Samuel is in heaven, and all my prayers for his salvation are 'ANSWERED AT LAST.'"

NOTE TO THE FIRST SERIES.

The reader may rest assured that these narratives are substantially true, as hundreds in Rochdale and its neighborhood can testify. The names given are the real names of the parties mentioned, and many of them are still alive.

For a long time I have been a visitor among the poor and the outcast, and four years ago opened for them a place of worship, called the "Chapel for the Destitute," to which large congregations have gathered of the REALLY DESTITUTE. Some of these Tales have been given in my Annual Reports, and their favorable reception induces me to offer them for a wider circulation.

I am a tradesman, and make no pretension to literary ability. If He whom I desire to serve condescends to use me as a medium of good to others, my earnest wish will be realized. To Him my prayer has been, "HOLD THOU MY RIGHT HAND."

J. ASHWORTH.

BROADFIELD, *Rochdale*, 1862.

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BY JOHN ASHWORTH.

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